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Airplanes' Hum Echoes Tensions Of Superpowers

The increasing tension between the two superpowers is alarmingly illustrated by top-secret air traffic in the Caribbean, across the Atlantic and from the nation's capital to Indiana.

Here's the story on the three missions, all of which have ominous strategic implications in the East-West military rivalry. My associate Dale Van Atta learned the details of the flights from high-level military and intelligence sources.

- In the Caribbean, the Soviets have quietly flown 14 of their older jet fighters—MiG17s made in the mid-1950s—from eastern Europe to Cuba, where they are now ready for delivery to the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

The move was in response to the bombing of Managua in early September by planes of the anti-Sandinista guerrillas. The bombing runs were the brainstorm of the CIA, which persuaded its "contra" clients that they must escalate their faltering campaign on the ground to an air war if they hoped to show Congress they were worthy of continued U.S. support.

The bombing may not have impressed Congress, but it convinced Nicaraguan officials that countermeasures had to be taken. At their request, the Soviets flew the MiG17s to Cuba, where they reportedly will be turned over to trained Nicaraguan pilots.

The MiG17s may be antiques by state-of-the-art combat standards, but they are more than a match for the anti-Sandinistas' bombers. In addition to a clear ability to sweep the skies clear of enemy raiders, the MiG17s can also be effective in ground attack against rebel hideouts in rural Nicaragua and in any aerial combat with Honduran fighter planes.

In retaliation, the Pentagon is seriously considering a "surgical strike" against the MiGs if they ever do arrive in Managua.

Thus the CIA, which unleashed the anti-Sandinista guerrillas in the first place, has succeeded in escalating the Nicaraguan conflict to a level that could now involve direct U.S. military action.

- The secret trans-Atlantic flights were by U.S. military transport planes, which have been shipping missile parts to West Germany and other European locations. The missions will frustrate the West German protest movement, whose leaders are trying to find out where and when

Pershing and cruise missiles are arriving for deployment in their country.

The protesters hope to block the arrivals with massive demonstrations. But with the missile parts already in Europe for assembly, the Pentagon hopes to have the first of the Pershings ready for operational deployment by the Dec. 15 target date.

- Another secret flight will be that of the president's "doomsday plane," the converted Boeing 747 that is to be the commander-in-chief's airborne command post in the event of nuclear war. It will be moved from Andrews Air Force Base in suburban Washington to a location in Indiana.

The reason is simple and scary: in the event of a Soviet attack, there wouldn't be enough time for the president to reach Andrews and take off in the airborne command post. Soviet submarine-launched missiles, coming in at a low trajectory, would cut the warning time from half an hour to less than 10 minutes. The president would never make it to his command post.

The plan now is to move the president inland during the early stages of a crisis, or send him by chopper to a bunker command post when the first warning of a Soviet launch is given. Later he would be transported to the airborne command post in Indiana.